

**Representation of History and Trauma Writing in *The Puppet Boy of  
Warsaw***

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**Abstract**

*Eva Weaver is a German author whose first novel, *The Puppet Boy of Warsaw* grapples with the issues of history, trauma and writing itself. Drawing upon LaCapra's understanding on history and trauma, this article examines the relation between representation of history and narrative nuances and how war-engendered trauma influences survivors, perpetrators and the later generations in different ways. It is founded that the dual focalization in the novel provides the complexity of history and also the mechanism of war. At the same time, the novel renders readers the extreme cruelty and inhumanity of the Holocaust and its ever-lasting influence through war-engendered trauma of different people.*

**Keywords:** *The Puppet Boy of Warsaw*; representation of history; trauma; transgenerational transmission of trauma.

Eva Weaver is an author who often explores issues of belonging and history in her work. Her work concerns issues of belonging, trauma, eros & the healing power of creative expression and ceremony. Her novel *The Puppet Boy of Warsaw* is a holocaust novel set in the Warsaw ghetto and in Siberia and has been translated into thirteen languages. In the novel, there are three chapters in total and it revolves around two main characters Mika and Max. Chapter one is mainly the story of Mika, the survivor of the Holocaust who experiences the life in the ghetto and moves to America after the end of the war. Chapter two focuses on the story of Max, a Wehrmacht soldier who is exiled to Siberia but finally manages to make his way home. The story starts with puppets on a poster and a coat sealed in a box which lift up the curtain of the past and trigger the traumatic memories of survivor Mika.

### 1. Representation of History Under Dual Focalization

Within Mika's memories, the time line and place descriptions clearly reconstruct the life during the Holocaust. A brief overview of the time line in Mika's telling can demonstrate that most of the dates have been checked with historical events. The coat was made in 1938 when the war was about to begin. And in September 1939, the bombing and invasion started. On 29th September 1939, Warsaw surrendered. German soldiers began to capitulate a series of directives to confine Jewish people's life. For example, first, they banished entertainment and Jewish blood were forbidden to enter local parks and museums. Second, Jews were forbidden to use public trams. And then, Jewish children were withdrawn from public schools. In October, 1940, the confinement was aggravated and all the Jewish people were ordered into a ghetto. All these directives ruthlessly and inhumanly deprived Jews of their rights. In July 1941, Mika lost his dear and brave grandfather and found consolation in the coat and puppets. During this period of time, Mika began his double life. On the one hand, he put on puppet shows for "rats" after meeting Max even though he held hatred toward all the German soldiers he met. On the other hand, he made use of this opportunity and tried to sneak children out the ghetto from his coat. In July, 1942, deportations started and Mika got separation from his mother. And at the end, Mika successfully made his way out of the attack. The time mentioned above relevant to the Holocaust is used without mistake ("Ghettos in Occupied Poland"). With further research on the website of Holocaust Museum, it is found that the novel presents readers with the basic timeline of the Holocaust and the situation in ghetto life is much similar in many ways.

As LaCapra states, narratives in fiction also involve truth claims on a structural or general level by providing insight into phenomena such as slavery or the Holocaust, by offering a reading of a process or period, or by giving at least a plausible "feel" for experience and emotion which may be difficult to arrive at through restricted documentary methods (*Writing History, Writing Trauma* 13). Indeed, Mika's traumatic memories render a basic temporal structure of the war and vividly represent how extremely unbearable life was in the ghettos. Overcrowding was common and apartment might have several families living in it. Plumbing broke down, and human waste was thrown in the streets along with the garbage. Contagious diseases spread rapidly in such cramped, unsanitary housing. People were always hungry. With

the reminiscence of Mika about the past, the author is able to intertwine the fictional story with the historical events and thus represent the history. As a matter of fact, in addition to the checked timeline, the place is also specifically selected and incorporated in the story. For example, when Max goes out to play a puppet show for German soldiers, he notices that something has changed: “the Germans had divided the ghetto into two parts: the biggest in the north-west of the city, and the ‘small ghetto’ to the south. They didn’t want to lose Chlodna Street to us and so they built a small wooden bridge between the two parts” (*Puppet Boy* 43). LaCapra once expresses that trauma and traumatic events, experiences, or processes, such as genocides and other forms of violence and abuse, may involve double binds, and may limit what may be represented with any degree of adequacy. But there are dimensions of the traumatic that can be represented and should be as lucidly and accurately as possible (2016 377). Indeed, the footbridge which can be found in the Holocaust Museum connects two parts of the Warsaw ghetto and is another great evidence to demonstrate the novel’s writing on history. Mika’s memories not only achieve an objective reconstruction of the past by presenting historical events with checked time lines and places but more importantly, render readers an unsettling of the cruelty and inhumanity of the Holocaust by such a witness narrative.

If Max’s memories vividly represent the history of the Holocaust, then Max’s story presents the complexity of war and its mechanism. Compared to the narration of Mika, Max’s story is made up with more fictionality and less accurate timeline. Nevertheless, it renders another perspective on the Holocaust and exhibits the complexity of history and how readers should comprehend it. When Max spends time in Siberia with other prisoners, he has an interesting conversation with them which deserves attention. One of the soldier Heinz thinks that what they do is what they have to do. It is their duty and that’s all. However, Max holds different opinion that he has been part of too much and he would never sleep well. Heinz and other soldiers attempt to persuade Max to shake off the guilt: “we were just following orders! We’re ordinary Wehrmacht soldiers, remember... But that’s what happened in a war, people die. Look, Max, we weren’t SS or SA, we were just ordinary soldiers. We did what we had to do. Now give it a rest... I didn’t personally sign the orders to ship the Jews to their death. I never tortured anyone. I only carried a gun and followed orders” (172)<sup>1</sup>. Heins’s understanding about their behavior invokes people’s thinking on the war. Indeed, there are some soldiers who take part in the war and do not know clearly their motives and simply follow orders. The problematic part lies in that even though it is just following orders, the action of taking guns and shooting people and inhuman treatment of other human beings cannot be downplayed like that. Max’s reflection of his role in the war is rare and precious. Through Max’s eyes, it can be seen that even during the war, things are not divided in dual oppositions. Max, being a Wehrmacht soldier, follows the order of German and kicks Jews out of their home, but at the same time, he tries to help Mika as possible as he can, which obviously violates the basic rule

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<sup>1</sup> The part of the text that is marked only with numbers is the page number of the quoted content from the electronic version of *The Puppet Boy of Warsaw*.

of his original position. The ethical predicament Max encounters and his behaviors provide the intricacy of war and the cruelty of its mechanism (Liu and Li 290).

What's more, Max's story also adds a different side to the Holocaust which people tends to neglect. When talking about the Holocaust, people might tend to focus on the cruelty and inhumanness of Nazi and ignore other people whose home is also destroyed during the war. When Max wants to know what happens to his wife, Erna recalls that: "it was 28 November 1944. It was a small air attack, but this time they got us. You never knew whether it would be your time or not. If not, then we probably would have died during that terrible night on 2 January" (196). After Erna's story, Max insists to go back to his hometown to have a look. Erna replies: "but it would've broken your heart to see Nuremberg after the bombing. The whole city destroyed, only a few walls standing in the old town and rubble everywhere. One source of water for the whole of the old city. And we had to clear the debris so the Allies could move in for their victory parades. It was terrible . . . and its tank. They couldn't find all the dead under the ruins" (202). Erna's experiences and Max's story display the author's humanitarian care on all the victims during the war and direct reader's attention to other victims of the war, which doesn't counteract or reduce the catastrophic experience of Jews in any way. It only adds a different side of history and also reveals the complexity of mechanism behind the war.

## 2. War-engendered Trauma of Survivor and Perpetrator

LaCapra mentions in *Writing History, Writing Trauma* that trauma is a disruptive experience that disarticulates the self and creates holes in existence; it has belated effects that are controlled only with difficulty and perhaps never fully mastered (2014, 41). Indeed, trauma leaves an indelible mark on those who suffer it. Especially for people who have participated in war and seen too much death, blood and horrible scenes, war-engendered trauma never ceases to haunt them and leaves a huge on both victim's life and perpetrator's life. As for the victim Mika in the novel, he undoubtedly experiences nightmares, flashbacks and other traumatic symptoms. Right after the end of WWII, Mika stays in a room for more than a year. Time, for him, has ceased to exist along with Ellie and all the other people. Shaving and washing have become a rarity for his daily life. For days, he does nothing but lie on the bed, staring at the ceiling and counting the wooden eyes in the beams. It is understandable that Mika has an extremely low desire to live in the aftermath of this terrifying event not to mention that all the people he loved and cared are gone and leave him alone in this world. But even enough with the help of his friend, Mika still cannot shake the influence of the war and flashbacks of traumatic events often interrupt his life when he tries to get back to the normal track. Jacob, a friend of Mika, takes Mika to meet his family members and pulls Mika out of the miserable life. But things work differently for Mika to some extent because for Mika, the more of Jacob's relatives he meets, the more his losses crush him and the nightmares returned: pounding boots, screaming puppets, blazing fires.

“Always fires. Here I was in a new world, this golden land of opportunity, of milk and honey, but without a single loved one. I wanted to disappear among the masses, to go unnoticed, and yet loneliness bit me like hunger. And believe me, I tried to forget Warsaw. But entering this new world, I learned that one can never rip oneself from the past, from one’s memory, nor from the earth on which one learned to walk. Like the blood that flows through our veins, our memories live deep inside us, are carved like hieroglyphs on to our souls” (151).

It is during the process of embracing the new world that Mika gradually realizes that what happens in the past cannot be left easily and just move on. The traumatic memories have been part of his existence and the attempt to forget those memories would be as impossible and painful as ripping part of him apart. Even in a different country, Mika still has these nightmares about the fire and the sound of soldiers’ boots. Each nightmare refreshes unspeakable experiences in the past so that Mika feels vulnerable and delicate to deal with traumatic memories. As what Mika said: “Sometimes I tried to talk about Warsaw, but even with those who had seen more than I could ever imagine, I never got far” (151). It’s not like that Mika doesn’t want to go far or get rid of the shadow of the war but that war-engendered trauma has caused holes in Mika’s life which cannot be simply filled by other things. Sadly, victims of trauma tend to relive occurrences, or at least find that those occurrences intrude on their present existence, for example, in flashbacks or in nightmares or in words that are compulsively repeated and that don’t seem to have their ordinary meaning, because they’re taking on different connotations from another situation, another place (*Writing History, Writing Trauma* 143). When Mika walking on the street and seeing a puppet play poster, Mika’s memories about the war are triggered and activated all over again. “Mika’s Heart pounded, quick, deep beats like those of a crazy drum.....Suddenly vertigo and a strong wave of nausea washed over him and with it a sense of helplessness and rage he would devour him like lion gorging on his insides. His chest tightened and he gasped for air” (11). No matter how many years it has passed, war- engendered trauma still persists like a never-ending battle following Mika. And this time the poster gives Mika the final blow so that he asks Danny to go home and shows him something about the past and is ready to tell the unspeakable story under the urge of speaking out.

Not only victims of the war suffer from the pain of trauma, perpetrators of war taste the bitter side of war as well. In the novel, when Max, a Wehrmacht soldier, is sent to Siberia prison at the very end of the world, he has a debate with other soldiers. When some of the soldiers think they are just following orders and carrying guns is their duty. Max joins the debate and says something different: “I’ve seen enough in Warsaw to give me nightmares for the rest of my life. I’ve been part of too much. I’ll never sleep well again” (169). Instead of taking following orders for granted, Max admits the criminal part of his action and confesses the sin of the past--“God, all these terrible dreams. I’m in Warsaw again, looking down the long-cobbled street. I am alone with the flame-thrower by my side...Then an endless stream of faces I’ve

never seen...screaming...Then I wake up..." (171). Like Mika, Max is haunted by incessant nightmares and terrifying scenes in the war and cannot shake the huge amount of guilt of inhuman behaviors. When the position of Max has been reversed from a perpetrator to a victim, Max then starts to see things from a different perspective and realizes previous action is unacceptable. Especially at one night, when he is extremely hungry and has nothing to eat, knowing where his roommate hides a small piece of bread, Max steals it and sneaks out. And just after Max stuffing the empty stomach with the bread, a memory flashed before his eyes. There are so many times that he and other soldiers march past children starving on the ghetto streets and numerous stick-thin arms reaching out to him. The flashback of memories jumps out of his mind like a tightly clenched fist slamming Max's stomach, making him sick and vomit. It is apparent that in spite of being a perpetrator, Max still bears serious trauma and it lays bare the ever-lasting influence war has on all the people who experience it.

Apart from leaving a significant impact on Max, war-engendered trauma also stands like a huge barrier obstructing the communication among him, his families and the society. When Max escapes the prison and successfully arrives home, he feels that everything is so normal out there and he can't find a way to fit in. He doesn't know what's right anymore, what really happened and how to go on with his life. He often asks himself that how can people like them go on living as if nothing happens after Poland, after Russia, after Auschwitz since they bring death everywhere they go. And although Karl has stepped into his father's shoes and become apprenticed as a carpenter after the war, he hardly speaks to his father (196). The relationship between Max and his son shifts dramatically. When Karl is young, he adores his father and feels proud of him. But when Max returns from the war, Karl doesn't know how to be around his father because of the complicated ethical identity. Karl is no longer simply the son of a soldier but the son of a soldier who is participant of the Holocaust. Similarly, the intimacy once Max has with his wife has faded with time. In the middle of the night, Max confides all the changes in the puppet prince and says: "But there's this gap between us, as deep as and wide as a gorge. As if she's another country. And Karl? He's polite but jumpy, tiptoes around me, the stranger in the house who can't take too much noise" (197). Max, Karl and Erna all realize the huge gulf between them due to the influence of war which could never fully be bridged. Silence gradually becomes regular guest of their house.

Even stepping out of the house, Max also finds it difficult to maintain a normal relationship with other people. When he finds a job as a carpenter, other colleagues think him as the walking dead. And the time he decides to go back to see his old city, he gets all the puzzled glances from the people at station and shouts at a stranger. All these behaviors demonstrate that war-engendered trauma seriously damages Max's health and normal life. The inhumanity and cruelty of the Holocaust becomes the nightmares of both victims and perpetrators and the trauma it results in permanently affects their lives. In this way, the novel shows concern to the victims in the Holocaust such as Mika and at the same time, expresses appropriate consideration of those who are passively involved in the war mechanism.

### 3. Transgenerational Transmission of Trauma

War-engendered trauma is not exclusive to those who experience wars, as the memory is passed on to later generations, trauma can instigate mental suffering in subsequent generations (Marita and Calvo 9). When Mika tells the whole story to his grandson, he mentions his daughter Hannah and how she is haunted by all these people she never has a chance to meet: “Hannah, sweet little Hannah, now grown up to be a proud, beautiful woman, yet so burdened by ghosts, crowding her shoulders: the ghosts of little Esther, Ellie, Cara and Marek, ghosts she could sense, but never name. How often had she woken from nightmares, telling him with wide eyes of roomfuls of children she doesn’t recognize, stretching out their little hands” (153). Though Hannah, Mika’s daughter, doesn’t have the experience of war and never lives with the children in the ghetto, she is haunted by numerous phantoms of children. It indicates that the pain of war-engendered trauma is transplanted from survivors to later generations. Transgenerational phantoms are classic symptom of incorporation trauma. The secretive trauma of the family appears repeatedly and forms a cleavage of subsequent generation bearing trauma indirectly in their psychological space.

Abraham states that the phantom is a formation of the unconscious that has never been conscious -- for good reason. It passes -- in a way yet to be determined -- from the parent’s unconscious into the children. Clearly, the phantom has a function different from dynamic repression. The phantom’s periodic and compulsive return lies beyond the scope of symptom formation in the sense of a return of the repressed; it works like a ventriloquist, like a stranger within the subject’s own mental topography (*The Shell and the Kernal* 173). Though Mika attempts to seal the past memories behind him and puts the coat, puppets and everything relevant to the war in a box and leaves it deep down in the wardrobe, the trauma still persists in his mind and exudes through the unconscious to the outside environment. For Mika, he thinks that it will be better if he doesn’t tell the truth to his daughter as if the silence can produce a protective shield and keep them safe. However, living in such a trauma-stricken place, Mika’s daughter, Hannah herself has nightmares about the war and the existence of Ellie, Cara and other family members of Mika. It is obvious that transgenerational transmission of trauma has deeply influenced Hannah and her life.

If Hannah should be considered as the passive receiver of transmission of trauma, then Mara, Max’s granddaughter would be the one who is voluntarily involved in the vortex of trauma. All it starts when Mara finds tired of the books stacked in the children section in the library and decides to have a glimpse of the history section for adults. And one afternoon Mara sits on the floor of the history section with a large book in her lap, names and blurred black and white photographs tumbling before her eyes: Auschwitz, Buchenwald, Mauthausen, Treblinka. All these unfamiliar names and the glimpse of another world fuel a hunger in Mara’s heart. She has a fierce need to see into the abyss of the human heart and learns about what happened in the

past through unearthing photographs, drawings, stories and even poems of those who survive and could still speak. The name of that darkness “Holocaust” tastes bitter in her mouth and generates a thousand questions in her mind so that she asks her father to tell all the things to her. But taking the age into consideration, her father doesn’t reveal the darkness to her until Mara turns fifteen. The fact that Karl tells the story of Max and what happens in the war to Mara plays an important part for the little girl’s growth. Because before knowing all the things related to the war, Mara is just an innocent girl who loves reading. But after knowing the connection she has with WWII, Mara never forgets the story her father has told her about the boy from Warsaw, Mika, and her grandpa Max. The story about what had happened in the war (222). Karl’s telling exemplifies the power of the narration and it entails a kind of counter-transference, which makes people exposed to other people’s traumatic experiences. The third generation must gather knowledge piecemeal, from vague references, indirect stories, conversations overheard, oblique observation, and from documents, abstract “histories” (Aarons and Berger 6). All these things gradually influence her life track and Mara, instead of being an indifferent onlooker, makes up her mind to should her responsibility to face this part of history with bravery. After being a nurse for twenty years and playing puppet shows for children, Mara comes to realize she wants to be a puppeteer to brings joy for other people and more importantly, to let more people know the story about the puppet boy.

The action of Mara initiatively learns about the Holocaust is essentially meaningful because it includes affective involvement and tendency to repeat what is found in or projected into the other, thus posing the problem of acting out, working over and working through that tendency (LaCapra, *Understanding Others* 57). It is this kind of co-implication behavior that makes ethical responsibility and political agency possible. Out of the motive of telling the story right and knowing more about the desperate situation in the ghetto, Mara sets on the journey to Warsaw. Up to this point, Mara’s position has changed from the receiver of transgenerational transmission of trauma to an explorer of the place where all the trauma originates. As a matter of fact, the need to explore the history and know more about the Holocaust is also considered as a form of acting out trauma because Mara repeatedly exposes herself in the traumatic environment and her emotions would undoubtedly be affected. In spite of all these, Mara still takes up the responsibility of later generation and chooses the right attitude to face history. While being in Warsaw, she keeps finding the name of the puppet boy Mika in the monument. The gesture not only signals a simple search for connection with the past but also a quest for the truth of history. Even without success, Mara still has faith in it and never throws away any opportunity that might reaches out for Mika. Here Mika stands for a gate that opens to the past and the truth, a gate that Mara might apologize for her grandpa, a gate that connects the victims and perpetrators once spending time together during the war. And Mara’s efforts lie in the communication between the present and the past, the victim and the perpetrator, the transgenerational transmission trauma and the original trauma.

The transgenerational transmission of trauma experienced by Mara is presented more



clearly after her visit to Warsaw. Seeing the original place where all the terrifying events happen makes her have a more direct touch with trauma. Walking inside in the Pasiak's belly and seeing a great variety of objects belonging to the prisoners here before, she realizes her cheeks gradually become wet. The unconscious physical and emotional reaction reflects the contagious power of trauma. A close encounter with the city, along with reading history books and listening to stories makes Mara become a victim of war-engendered trauma and experience traumatic symptoms like nightmares: "that night Mara dreamt she was a dog, a large grey mongrel, searching for Mika amid a vast labyrinth of prison corridors, sniffing, scurrying in and out of every cell to no avail" (225). What Mara goes through testifies the transmissible characteristic of trauma. Trauma can leak between mental and physical symptoms, between victims and their listeners or viewers who are commonly moved to forms of overwhelming sympathy, even to the extent of claiming secondary victimhood (*The Trauma Question* 3). The irresistible repetition to discover what happens in the war makes Mara directly exposed to trauma and become a victim of transgenerational transmission of trauma. At the same time, her co-implication in excavating the truth of history also entitles her a responsible agent for the past.

#### 4. Conclusion

Through the analysis mentioned above, there are several findings about the representation of history and trauma writing in *The Puppet Boy of Warsaw*. First of all, the novel manages to represent the history through Mika's memories and Max's experience. Mika's memories not only achieve an objective reconstruction of the past by presenting historical events with checked time lines and places but also discloses the harsh reality of war trampling on human lives. Meanwhile, Max's experiences complement a different side of history and reflect the intricate mechanism of war. Second, the novel further demonstrates the violence, cruelty and inhumanity of the Holocaust and its ever-lasting influence through the depiction of war-engendered trauma of victim and perpetrator and transgenerational transmission of trauma. Third, by making the subsequent generations a responsible agent for telling the truth, the novel shows readers how to deal with the relations among war, history and trauma.

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